

Participants

(in order of appearance)

- **Jan Eliasson**
Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Darfur
- **Kim Campbell**
Secretary-General of the Board of Club de Madrid
- **Sadig Al Mahdi**
President of Umma Party and Imam of Alansar
- **El Hassan bin Talal**
President of the Arab Thought Forum
- **Ortwin Hennig**
Chair International Task Force on Preventive Diplomacy
- **Gareth Evans**
President and CEO of the International Crisis Group
- **Martti Ahtisaari**
Chairman of the Board, Crisis Management Initiative
- **Thorvald Stoltenberg**
President, Red Cross Norway

TRANSCRIPTION

INTRODUCTION

Jan Eliasson: I saw the killing, I saw the dying, and I came back to the United Nations filled with an urge to move the attention from the humanitarian disaster phase to the prevention phase. And I felt like I had been a fireman working day shift and night shift, and I had arrived to the houses when they had already burned down. I felt what we needed to do, morally and politically, was to make sure that instead of coming to the houses when the fire had raged, we should have come to the place when the smoke developed.

Kim Campbell: I think we often get into dynamics that lead to conflict when we really don't understand another country or another society or another culture. We don't know how to read what they are saying. We don't understand their language, and it can lead to a kind of brinkmanship or dangerous stand-offs that lead to hostilities that are very, very difficult.

Sadig Al Mahdi: There are many fault lines there are many grievances. Also there are problems of inter-religious conflict, there are problems of inter-cultural problems.

El Hassan bin Talal: You don't send the French Ambassador and the Spanish Ambassador, with all due respect, to speak to the Taliban to implore them not to destroy the Bamiyan temples. You send Muslims to talk to Muslims and to have a public disagreement, so that we Muslims can say to the Taliban that what you are contemplating is not in our name. So this aspect of cultural affinity is hugely important.

THE TASK FORCE AND ITS STRATEGIC GOAL

Ortwin Hennig: The East-West Institute launched a new initiative, the International Task Force on Preventive diplomacy in May 2007. The main goal of this task force is to devise practical mechanisms to generate domestic and international political will to shorten the time between early warning and effective early action to prevent violent conflict.

Sadig Al Mahdi: It was found necessary to find a forum that is not linked to any state, that is not official, but that is composed of individuals, who have experience in government, who have a stature in international relations without being prime ministers or presidents or any official title. So that they act as a body together to help in the process of preventive diplomacy. And so myself and others have been chosen to do this job of preventative diplomacy.

Gareth Evans: The problem is really now, not so much early warning as early response, early action in response to that, because nobody these days with all this kind of effort going on can possibly pretend they don't know that situations are boiling up.

Martti Ahtisaari: So there is an enormous amount of work and I hope that the ground rules can be established, that we can react because information is available. It's the political will. We need leaders who are prepared to use their resources, much earlier than at the moment.

Thorvald Stoltenberg: Early warning is of imperative importance but the most difficult part of early warning is the interpretation of the warning. What is a warning? What does it consist of? And how should you interpret it?

Jan Eliasson: The media has a great responsibility in this respect, politicians have a great responsibility, those who deal with diplomacy, military and peacekeeping have that responsibility.

THE TASK FORCE'S ADDED BENEFIT

Ortwin Hennig: This is a unique chance to work for the creation of a cooperative international order by reaching out to decision makers to sensitize them that conflict prevention needs to become part of their decision making.

Gareth Evans: I think it's a matter of putting in place institutional machinery within the structure of governments, within the structure of aid agencies that focus on good governance that focus on strategies long term; medium term, short term designed to ward off conflict. If you just rely on ad-hoc commitment by policy-makers that will very rarely happen because people just don't focus on preventive activities, they focus on reaction when something happens. That's life that's human nature.

Sadig Al Mahdi: but there are situations where the Security Council, because it is composed of States finds it difficult to move flexibly. But non-official bodies for preventive diplomacy have got more flexibility because they are not tied to this or that State and therefore they can move freely. The more people are conscious of the need to rid the world of such conflicts, the more will be greater efforts by all people. Of course at some point when a conflict develops, the Security Council intervenes – however the Security Council cannot intervene in terms of preventive diplomacy because unless it's complained to by a State it cannot move – others can and should move.

El Hassan bin Talal: I think that the absence of any form of systemic crisis avoidance is a reflection on the United Nations system. There is no interconnectivity between United Nations organizations.

Thorvald Stoltenberg: I think it is of imperative importance to achieve results on preventive diplomacy that is not front-page but as low profile and if possible work done in secrecy. That produces results. For example, the success of the Oslo Process was actually that we made the negotiations in full secrecy. I was later on the Balkans on the negotiations for peace in the Balkans and every meeting, every small conversation, the world press was waiting for statements and were outside and talking with the parties, while we actually negotiated. That made it pretty difficult.

CHALLENGES TO PEACE

Kim Campbell: It's very hard to focus people's attention on problems that may be some way down the road. One of the hardest things for politicians to do is to think long-term and to plan long-term. Even in terms of the domestic agendas of their own countries, not to mention crises that might be looming on the horizon.

Martti Ahtisaari: I would hope that the international community will try to solve all the crises we have, which have already have taken place, because we have too many frozen conflicts.

Jan Eliasson: The good news is hard to get out, but both of the cases, Southern Africa, drought in 1991-1992 and Macedonia in 2001, actually disasters were avoided, by preventive action.

CONCLUSION

Gareth Evans: All these things, all these situations, are very fragile, but there are ways of resolving all of them by intelligent application of Mr. Churchill's principle that jaw-jaw makes a lot more sense than going to war.

El Hassan bin Talal: I don't think that might can continue to be right. I don't think anybody is above the law, and particularly international law. This should be the understanding of how to rebuild confidence in a hope, at least, of light at the end of the tunnel.

Kim Campbell: I don't think we will ever resolve that problem entirely, but I think it is important for us to understand that as we get a more democratic world and whatever the constituencies are that governments respond to, those have to be part of the overall effort to create a sense of urgency.

Martti Ahtisaari: I understand how important the economic development is in any society because without that and the fight against poverty you will have problems in a society. And also that people will have a chance to develop their capabilities and earn their livelihood. This is preventive diplomacy. It's not only the conflicts which we are looking, I think it's creating conditions ... how we could avoid the problems in the society.

Ortwin Hennig: In conclusion let me say that preventive diplomacy is a fascinating and at the same time a very often frustrating business to be in. But those of us engaged in it are not wasting our time. Preventive diplomacy is a moral imperative, an economic necessity, a humanitarian must and a political obligation. Preventive diplomacy is difficult but I am convinced that it is possible.